

## CHAPTER 5: THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS

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The Importance of Mentors  
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Mentoring is a professional activity, a trusted relationship, a meaningful commitment. The origins of mentoring can be traced back to ancient Greece as a technique to impart to young men important social, spiritual, and personal values. Mentoring as we know it today is loosely modeled on the historical craftsman/apprentice relationship, where young people learned a trade by shadowing the master artisan. In the mid-70s, corporate America redefined mentoring as a career development strategy. The concept of mentoring faculty and administrators is relatively new to higher education and rare in information technology circles, where staff professional development often takes the form of technical manuals and certifications. It is precisely this type of support organization, however, that needs a strong foundation of mentoring to build and retain a healthy workforce that can react quickly to change and can develop, adapt, and regenerate itself over time.

Mentoring relationships range from loosely defined, informal collegial associations in which a mentee learns by observation and example to structured, formal agreements between expert and novice co-mentors where each develops professionally through the two-way transfer of experience and perspective. Whether the relationship is deemed formal or informal, the goal of mentoring is to provide career advice as well as both professional and personal enrichment. For this chapter, we define a mentoring relationship as helping and supporting people to "manage their own learning in order to maximize their professional potential, develop their skills, improve their performance, and become the person they want to be."<sup>1</sup>

### The Need to Develop IT Leaders in Higher Education

The seminal EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) study on information technology leadership in higher education<sup>2</sup> warns that while the majority of IT professionals surveyed find working in higher education to be rewarding, the next generation of potential IT leaders is dwindling. The up-and-comers perceive campus IT as a cool climate for innovation yet lacking in a diverse workforce. Perhaps most strikingly, they find the CIO career path too hefty a personal commitment. This finding is particularly ominous because over a quarter of all respondents planned to retire within five years or less, leaving a gaping need for new leadership. The report makes two recommendations to alleviate this problem: looking for leaders in nontraditional places, and identifying and mentoring promising candidates.

### Organizations' Responsibilities

College campuses, while expert at offering traditional education to a diverse student clientele, are not as skilled in identifying and supporting their own staffs' professional development (PD) needs. Few institutions dedicate the time and resources required to offer formal mentoring programs to their IT staff. Those that do usually target specific groups of employees—usually women or minorities. As one excellent example, Information Services at the University of Kansas sponsors the Women's Mentoring Program (<http://www.information-services.ku.edu/mentoring>), which provides support for middle-level women managers, empowering them to progress in their chosen career paths and grow their professional skills. Professional organizations such as EDUCAUSE facilitate mentoring by offering a variety of PD programs and leadership institutes for IT staff; indeed, many of these programs initiate mentoring relationships.

While most of the popular books on leadership expound on mentoring, you cannot learn to be a mentor or mentee by reading a book or following cookie-cutter leadership advice. One size does not fit all, particularly in higher education IT organizations. Technology is constantly evolving, making mentoring difficult because leadership responsibilities constantly shift to stay abreast of change. The employees of these organizations work hard to serve the needs of their academic community and must often react quickly to emergencies with constrained resources. Mentoring programs would appear to be luxuries in this fast-paced and unpredictable work environment.

For mentoring to effect institutional change in higher education, it must be more than informal or spontaneous. The leadership within an institution must first recognize and identify the need for mentoring, and then plan, develop, support, and promote a program that directly addresses specific workforce gaps—both current and future. Regardless, whether the leadership at an institution recognizes and supports mentoring, a staff member's career can benefit from a mentoring relationship, even if not officially sanctioned.

### Goals of a Mentoring Relationship

An essential first step in a successful mentoring relationship is for both the mentor and mentee to identify, define, and honestly articulate their common and individual goals and motives. Does the mentor want to eventually delegate a portion of his or her job responsibilities to the mentee? Or is the mentor secretly developing a succession plan? Does the mentee envision mastering their "craft" or transitioning away from hands-on work to build management and leadership skills? Is the mentee planning to use the mentoring experience to progress within the organization or to seek employment elsewhere? Are both looking to give back to the organization and make the work environment a better place for all, or is mentoring a stepping-stone to personal and professional growth?

Based on interviews with three senior administrators at the University of South Carolina, co-mentors William Hogue and Ernest Pringle<sup>3</sup> developed a "work in progress" set of Mentor Guiding Principles:

**Strive for mutual benefits.** The relationship should be defined from the beginning as mutually beneficial. Each participant has committed to the relationship by choice. Each should openly share his or her goals for the relationship and work collaboratively to help achieve them.

**Agree on confidentiality.** Maintaining an environment of confidentiality is a critical component in building trust between the participants. Without a mutually understood ability to speak freely as the situation warrants, the relationship is unlikely to reach its full potential.

**Commit to honesty.** The participants should be willing to candidly share what they expect to gain from the relationship and their vision for getting there. They

should be prepared to offer frank feedback as appropriate, even if the feedback is critical.

**Listen and learn.** Mutual benefit and honesty can only be achieved when both members feel their viewpoints are heard and respected. Mentors, especially, need to remember that the relationship is not primarily about them. Co-mentors should not be intimidated or made to feel their views are not valued.

**Build a working partnership.** Consider structuring a working partnership that includes project consultation or active collaborations rooted in the common ground of shared professional goals. These collaborations can lead to discoveries about each participant's preferred working style, daily obligations, and professional aspirations.

**Lead by example.** Actions create the most lasting impression.

**Be flexible.** It might help for a mentoring relationship to have defined goals, but the process may be as important—or more so—than the goals.

## Types of Mentoring Relationships

There are many types of mentoring relationships, and it is essential to understand the differences and nuances prior to cultivating and entering into a mentoring agreement. What characteristics do you seek—formal or informal, mandatory or optional, short term or long term?

One of the most important distinctions is whether the mentoring relationship is considered formal or informal. Most mentoring relationships sit somewhere on a continuum between these two extremes. Formal mentoring relationships are often mandatory—leadership assigns mentors to new hires or promising candidates for promotion. The meetings are scheduled, tracked, documented, and evaluated based on clearly articulated goals and milestones. Informal mentoring relationships are more spontaneous and based on loosely defined results. In fact, many mentoring relationships, while fulfilling the PD needs of the participants, are not acknowledged as such. Often the mentee enters an informal mentoring relationship because of an intrinsically motivated need to do better. Whereas formal mentoring relationships tend to be more hierarchical, with seniority, status, and even age defining the mentor/protégé relationship, informal mentoring is more likely based on trust or admiration.

Another important attribute to clarify at the outset is whether the relationship is short term or long term. A short-term mentorship usually addresses a specific set of needs, while a long-term mentoring relationship might fulfill broad-based PD requirements over the course of a career.

Despite the benefits of mentoring throughout a career, the skills and type of advice needed inevitably change over time. At the beginning of a career, a more job-specific mentor may be appropriate.<sup>4</sup> For example, a suitable mentor might be someone who is highly technically skilled and can provide advice on ways to become more technically proficient. As organizational roles evolve into more supervisory capacities, mentors who can provide more career-related, organizational, political, and managerial skills development can be beneficial. In the later part of a career, retirement and succession planning guidance may become more important. Longtime employees also might benefit from what Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, called "reverse mentoring"—partnering with someone from a younger generation to share expertise, update skills, and gain a fresh perspective.

## Types of Mentors

Different mentoring relationships generate a whole host of mentor types and styles.

**The wise leader** is someone who through executive title, seniority, or status within the organization has reached the pinnacle of his or her career and is worthy of and willing to impart knowledge and wisdom to others in the organization. Often natural leaders, these politically astute individuals exude a certain air of confidence and innately understand and have thrived within the organization's culture and practices. While most of their mentoring relationships are formally arranged, wise leaders have been known to take on protégés in informal apprenticeships.

**The life coach** is a professional mentor, often in the organization's human resources division or an outside consultant. Staff looking to change jobs or careers often hire life coaches outside the work environment to evaluate their performance, prepare for new career opportunities, or simply set and achieve personal goals. These relationships tend to be short term with a targeted and prioritized set of objectives. While life coaching usually happens in a face-to-face environment, more and more life coaches are offering their services virtually—over the telephone or the Internet.

**The teacher** could be an educator, working with current or past students to build their professional talents and skills, or someone who assumes the "honorary" role of teacher—promoting learning and growth by imparting knowledge, debating ideas, or recommending resources. A teaching relationship might be officially sanctioned, such as enrolling for independent study, or as informal as dropping by during office hours for a chat.

**Peer mentors** participate in informal relationships in which colleagues or friends pair up to help each other grow within an organization. They might team up to gain professional development experience, share networking contacts, or simply support each other's career path choices.

**The confidante** is not so much a mentor as someone to use as a touchstone or sounding board. It is helpful in both healthy and dysfunctional work environments to have a confidante with whom to bat ideas around, air frustrations, request reality checks, and seek advice.

**The self-help mentor** takes the form of books, manuals, articles, checklists, software, Web sites, and so forth that provide proven formulas or step-by-step advice on how to grow professionally. While not a substitute for the real thing, some of these popular resources are useful in helping an employee map a career path and/or lay a foundation for future mentoring relationships.

**The inner mentor** is the internal voice that calls upon intuition to glean and mold life experiences into a personalized leadership philosophy. This nontraditional self-mentoring approach takes into account past experiences, current competencies, and future potential. The first step is to conduct a life experience inventory, identifying experiences that might hold leadership potential. It is the deconstruction—the picking apart—of these experiences to reveal underlying values and beliefs that will translate into a customized set of leadership principles.<sup>5</sup> The process of mentoring yourself is difficult—it takes concentration, self-reflection, and the ability to trust your own instincts.

## Mentoring Phases

The literature is crowded with examples of mentoring models. Kathy Kram<sup>6</sup> divided mentoring relationships into four phases—initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition. William Gray<sup>7</sup> envisioned a five-step mentor/protégé relationship—prescriptive, persuasive, collaborative, confirmative, and successful. Lois Zachary<sup>8</sup> cycled through four phases—prepare, negotiate, enable, and close. We have distilled these models and others down to four distinct stages—identify, negotiate, facilitate, and graduate.

### Identify

In finding a mentor, it is important to establish the goals of the mentorship and the core competencies needed for effectiveness in present and future positions. Identifying an appropriate mentor and objectives is critical to successful career planning. (See Table 1.) For example, a new campus IT manager hired from industry probably will need help acclimating to the culture and politics of higher education. In this case, it would be wise to seek a successful mentor who has a deep understanding of how the institution works and of the historical characteristics for managerial excellence within the organization.

**Table 1. Identify Phase Responsibilities**

| Mentor's Responsibilities  | Mentee's Responsibilities   |
|--|---|
| Have a clear understanding of your motivation for becoming a mentor                      | Have a clear understanding of your motivation for wanting to be mentored            |
| Agree to mentor based on a realistic assessment of your skills and leadership experience | Select a mentor based on preestablished criteria relevant to your career goals      |
| Be open to mentoring individuals from outside your discipline                            | Broaden your search for a mentor to include nontraditional fields and organizations |

Potential mentors can be found in a variety of ways. A few large institutions have formal mentoring programs. Others have formal, IT-specific mentoring programs. An organization's human resources department can often provide information on both internal and external mentoring opportunities. Outside the organization, professional associations such as EDUCAUSE, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), and various other technical and local networking groups can help locate potential mentors. Another method is using mailing lists and online resources to identify people with specific expertise and experience. Finally, think creatively in identifying mentors. Ask friends, family, and colleagues for personal referrals. Advice can be found anywhere, not just in one field or institution.

While most mentoring relationships take place within the same organization, no steadfast rule says a mentor or mentee cannot come from beyond the boundaries of the discipline, division, or even the institution, especially as you advance in your career. This practice is more common in smaller organizations where mentors may not be as plentiful or diverse. IT support often spans numerous units of an organization, so mentoring relationships might pair central support staff with decentralized staff. Universities also employ a broad range of professional staff, so it might be wise for IT professionals to choose a mentor from another area such as the office of business and finance or the college of education, depending on which professional development gaps they hope to address.

While most mentor/mentee relationships involve two individuals, choosing multiple mentors, simultaneously or over a period of time, might prove beneficial. IT is complex and multifaceted, and a network of mentors makes it easier for the mentee to adapt to change and gain a diverse portfolio of knowledge quickly. Also, new research supports building "relationship constellations," a theory espousing the advantages of a protégé cultivating developmental networks comprised of multiple mentors.<sup>9</sup>

Another way to build a mentoring relationship is to partner with a colleague in choosing a mentor together. This "doubling up" eases the mentor's time commitment, and the mentee partner brings a different perspective to the table, broadening the scope of discussion. Use caution when participating in group mentoring programs, however, because the relationship of one mentor to many mentees does not always allow participants to address their individual goals.

## Negotiate

Zachary<sup>10</sup> labeled the negotiating phase of the mentoring relationship as the "business phase." The mentoring partners must agree on the goals and outcomes, decide on ground rules, work out the details and logistics, and develop a mentoring plan complete with criteria for success. While formal mentoring programs might require a memorandum of understanding or even a signed contract, the negotiating phase is really about managing expectations, creating a shared understanding, and building a foundation of trust. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2. Negotiate Phase Responsibilities**

| Mentor's Responsibilities  | Mentee's Responsibilities  |
|--|--|
| Have a clear understanding of your expectations for your mentee and the ensuing relationship | Have a clear understanding of your expectations for your mentor and the ensuing relationship |
| Clearly communicate your expectations  | Clearly communicate your expectations  |
| Be flexible—be willing to alter your expectations and change your plans                      | Be flexible—be willing to alter your expectations and change your plans                      |
| Have a plan (formal or informal) with milestones and defined deliverables                    | Have a plan (formal or informal) with milestones and defined deliverables                    |
| Codevelop an exit strategy   | Codevelop an exit strategy   |
| Try to adapt your feedback to your mentee's learning style                                   | Inform your mentor of your preferred learning style  |
| Be realistic about the time commitment to successfully oversee the relationship              | Be realistic about the time commitment to do homework and self-reflection                    |

## Facilitate

The facilitation phase makes up the bulk of the mentoring relationship: the mentoring plan is implemented, and the relationship with the mentor is developed. (See Table 3.) For a mentor, Patricia Battin reminds us, the facilitation phase "means conscious tailoring of opportunities for individuals that require them to stretch—and then helping them do it."<sup>11</sup> For the mentee, this phase can be difficult, but ultimately rewarding—it means recognizing your strengths and weaknesses and addressing them through appropriate actions and opportunities.

| Table 3. Facilitate Phase Responsibilities                            |  |
|---|--|
| Mentor's Responsibilities   | Mentee's Responsibilities  |
| Advise, don't dictate   | Actively listen and contribute to the conversations                                |
| Advise on what you know; admit what you don't know or refer to others | Understand your mentor will not have all of the answers—be willing to look them up |
| Provide relevant examples and resources                               | Access resources—do your homework  |
| Recognize your mentee's weaknesses but build on his or her strengths  | Acknowledge your weaknesses but build on your strengths                            |
| Give constructive criticism   | Accept and reflect on constructive criticism                                       |
| Don't shy away from difficult conversations                           | Don't shy away from difficult conversations  |
| Periodically evaluate progress and reassess the relationship          | Periodically evaluate progress and reassess the relationship                       |
| Celebrate successes   | Celebrate successes  |
| Be reliable   | Be reliable  |

## Graduate

Once the mentoring relationship has been established and fostered, it is important to understand the parameters for when the association should change or end. (See Table 4.) Ending a mentoring relationship does not mean it has failed. Often, it simply means that the initial goals of the mentorship have been attained, and it is time to "graduate" and move on.

| Table 4. Graduate Phase Responsibilities                         |  |
|--|--|
| Mentor's Responsibilities  | Mentee's Responsibilities  |
| Be sensitive as to when the relationship has run its course      | Be sensitive as to when the relationship has run its course          |
| After mentoring relationship is finished, follow up on successes | Provide mentor with updates after mentoring relationship is finished |
| Provide a summative evaluation of the experience                 | Provide a summative evaluation of the experience                     |
| Don't forget to say thank you                                    | Don't forget to say thank you and give credit where credit is due    |
| Mark the graduation with a celebration                           | Mark the graduation with a celebration                               |
| Repeat the mentoring process with others                         | Give back to the profession and volunteer to mentor others           |

When ending a mentoring relationship, remember to thank a mentor for the knowledge and time provided. In the ensuing years, communicate your career progression. A mentoring relationship often evolves into a long-term professional friendship.

Sometimes, after a mentoring relationship begins, it may become apparent that the mentor chosen is not a good match for the mentee's PD needs. Perhaps the mentor has extenuating circumstances (for example, increased workload or family issues), or the participants simply cannot communicate effectively. In these cases, it is best for the two to have an honest conversation as to what is working and what is not working; if mentor and mentee cannot reconcile the differences, they should mutually agree to terminate the relationship.

## Politics of Mentoring

It is important to address the obvious—and not so obvious—workplace politics associated with mentoring. First, the choice of a mentor can be tricky. Will a professional or personal relationship be damaged if the prospective mentor turns down the request? Will a potential mentor perceive the request as an honor or as an obligation? Will the mentor's own sense of security be threatened by an ambitious mentee who might compete for future positions? Does the mentee understand how others in the organization will perceive his or her choice of mentor? Is the mentor well regarded within the organization and within the broader profession? Is the mentor's network of colleagues comprised of respected leaders? If the mentor fails professionally, will the mentee also fail by association?

Both mentor and mentee must consider others' perceptions of equity issues. While mentoring relationships between individuals of different generations, ethnic backgrounds, cultures, color, and special needs are encouraged in higher education, mentoring relationships between genders and between individuals with same-sex orientation are sometimes held to a different standard, with potential criticism exacerbated by the power differential often associated with mentoring. Ultimately, distrust of such mentoring relationships is almost always based on misguided perceptions, bigotry, lack of knowledge, or pettiness. The mentor and mentee must determine the risk and decide what is best for their professional growth. Note, however, that the examples provided throughout this chapter may not be appropriate for members of certain religions or cultures where mentoring relationships might be perceived as an improper activity between individuals of different status, gender, or other characteristics.

## Conclusion

This chapter serves as an introduction to the concepts of mentoring, particularly for those in higher education IT organizations. Every career and mentorship is unique, and may have different criteria and characteristics. Recognizing that professional development through mentorship can be highly beneficial to both mentor and mentee, mentoring is a critical element in preparing higher education leaders of the future. As Patricia Battin noted in her acceptance speech for the 1996 CAUSE Award for Exemplary Leadership and Information Technology Excellence,

Mentorship represents an individual commitment to seeking out, identifying, and developing in a variety of ways the leaders of the future—people who have the creativity, the intellect, the conceptual skills, and the personal qualities necessary to provide true transformational leadership in the challenging, ever-changing, and fluid environment of contemporary higher education.<sup>12</sup>

## Endnotes

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